R/V REGINA MARIS

— Ship to Shore News —

SEARCHLIGHT Vol. 7 No. 24 23 August 1982 Tovquassaq Bank

I was standing outside the galley a few minutes ago having my 6:00 a.m. morning coffee. As I looked into the main cabin, I thought of the many hundred mornings I have done exactly the same thing, how timeless that scene has become, and how it has provided me and many others with shelter, warmth, and that comfortable familiarity we call "home." Meanwhile for seven years the scene outside has varied from Greece to the Galapagos, from Venezuela to Greenland, from Silver Bank to Boston, from Cocos to Juneau--a veritable kaleidoscope of places, climates, and conditions, all bound together by a common purpose and a common venue we call REGINA MARIS. We all need familiar routines, like morning coffee, for comfort and security but how many of us are able at the same time to enjoy such a rich variety of scenes and experiences?

That special part of our kaleidoscope called Greenland continues to provide colorful experiences. Our search for other groups of humpbacks on the banks to the south was brought to a halt by fog Monday evening on Danas Bank. By then we had covered over a hundred miles without seeing any whales. Then a gale warning on Tuesday morning convinced me to seek shelter in nearby Fiskenaes Fjord. We entered this fjord, where we had never been before, through patches of dense fog, guided by remarkably precise radar and echo sounder navigation. It was an exciting experience.

Fiskenaes Fjord is narrow and over a hundred fathoms deep. It is only one of a number of narrow, deep, inter-connecting passages which extend into this area's low, rocky shore to the mountains 15-25 miles away. My impressions of this fjord and its village Fiskenaesset include beautiful scenery and a town full of quiet, friendly people who prosper on an inshore cod fishery. The water was generally too deep and narrow to anchor safely. In one of the anchorages we tried and abandoned we found three minke whale skeletons and the remains of a humpback killed this year--mute evidence that whaling is also an important activity.

Leaving Fiskenaes Thursday afternoon, we again headed for Fyllas Bank to photograph more of its humpbacks and extend our search northward for other groups as time and weather would permit. Once again Fyllas provided good information and many whales, although the animals were more dispersed. Nearly half of those photographed on Friday proved to be ones we had seen before this year. Six so far of the 40 we have photographed were also photographed here last summer.

Since Friday we have had near perfect weather--calm, sunny much of the time. This has allowed us to extend our search as far north as the southern end of Lille Hellefiske Bank and to find 20 or more additional humpbacks. Interestingly, these have proved extremely difficult to approach. They run at top speed when we get closer than half a mile. Even so we have obtained a dozen or more new pictures. Why are these animals so shy? We noted that there were no calves in this group. Are they a special group, segregated by age or sex? Have they been hunted and so fear ships?

Now we are working our way back to spend our remaining three days on Fyllas Bank, in order to photograph as many of that group of whales as possible. Meanwhile, sperm and finback whales, plus spectacular views of the coastal mountains, have enriched the hours between humpbacks.

Respectfully submitted,

George Nichols, Jr.
ORV REGINA MARIS

FALL DAY SAIL: Our fall day sail for members is scheduled for Sept. 19. For information and reservations, call Lori at (617) 523-3454/55. Priority will be given to members who were signed up for the spring day sail which was cancelled, and those on a waiting list.

This week's story starts with a peaceful day of whale photography and calm weather and ends with the raw cold of a sub-arctic gale.

We spent Monday looking for whales. Calm water made for good visibility of animals after the lifting of lengthy fog. The late afternoon hours were spent photographing tails--often against the background of icebergs or the mountains behind Godthaab. Pretty heady stuff for both whale-watchers and photographers!

After spending the night hove to on the bank, we were ready to go by 0700. Unfortunately, once again, thick fog kept creeping in so that the whales were often hard to see. Even so, it was a productive day which lasted until 5 p.m. when we called a halt to the study and headed in for the Godthaab Fjord entrance and the tiny harbor of Habets Ø Havn.

All our rolls of film have now been developed and printed. We have compared the pictures with each other to learn how many individuals were photographed and how many times each. In addition, we have checked the photos with last year's Greenland pictures to see how many of the whales came here at least as often as two years in a row; with the humpback whale catalog to see if any have used other feeding areas; and with our own collection from Silver Bank--in effect the long-range migrants. While all these comparisons have not been done as thoroughly as will be needed, the preliminary results are interesting.

We have collected photographs of about 70 individual whales in the course of our 2½ week study. Most were on Fyllas Bank. Of these, 19 were photographed here last year by Hal Whitehead or ourselves. Two long-range migrants have been identified, one from Silver Bank, also seen here in 1981, and one from Bermuda, seen about 14 years ago! Noteworthy is the fact that no matches with whales from other feeding areas have been found either this year or last, pointing to a clear-cut division between feeding populations.

The critical question, of course, is the size of the population and whether it is large enough to sustain the annual Greenlandic take of 10 animals. Calculations based on our identification of individual animals both this year and last give a total population estimate of about 200 animals. Fyllas Bank harbors the vast majority of these. Our own searches suggest that the number of animals elsewhere is small--probably very small. This view is not shared by the Greenlandic hunters. Nicoli Heinrich, president of the Greenland Hunters and Fishermen's Association, believes our estimates are correct for Fyllas Bank and that the largest concentration of animals is there. However, he feels 200 others are scattered along the coast, most to the south where our experience is limited, and in the north around Umanak. If he is correct, 10 animals is 5% of the total and probably represents a "sustainable" yield, i.e. it should never reduce the population. If our estimate is correct, then the take should not be more than 5 animals at most. It is important to note that Nicoli reports a general feeling among local people that humpbacks are on the increase--while minkes are being depleted by the current quota of 400 animals per year set by the IWC. They feel that the quota for minkes should be cut in half or further if the stock and its fishery is to survive.

Unfortunately, our attempt to enlarge our understanding of the banks to the south on our way home was once again aborted by fog. We left Godthaab Friday afternoon with calm seas, but the fog was so dense on Saturday that we gave up at noon, took a last look at Greenland's mountains and ice packs, and headed on for Newfoundland. By nightfall Saturday there were gale warnings and by 0300 Sunday we were hove to with 60 knot gusts. Gale force winds have persisted since, though as I write our barometer, which hit bottom at 28.29 inches an hour ago, has begun to rise and the wind to fall. We should be going again soon.

Respectfully submitted,

George Nichols, Jr.
ORV REGINA MARIS

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